

**How Sweet It Was:
The Story of Ball State's 1990 Sweet 16 Season**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Tyson Mathews

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Tony Edmonds

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

August 15, 2006

Expected Date of Graduation: July 2006

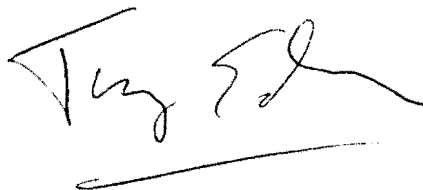
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tony Edmonds", with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

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Abstract

The 1989-90 season was a season of firsts for the Ball State men's basketball program. The team was in its first season under head coach Dick Hunsaker. It became the first team in Mid-American Conference history to win back-to-back regular season conference championships and back-to-back conference tournament titles. The 1990 Cardinals also became the first MAC team to reach the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament in its current format. To this day, no other Ball State team has ever advanced that far in the tournament. The following paper is a narrative account of the 1989-90 season. Through newspaper clippings and interviews with former players, I have attempted to piece together the story of the greatest season in Ball State basketball history.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This thesis is meant to serve as a narrative account of the 1989-90 Ball State men's basketball season, the year in which the team advanced to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament. I attempted to construct the narrative by familiarizing myself with the season through game stories and features in newspapers and from speaking with individual players. The main sources used for this thesis were newspaper articles from the *Muncie Star* (now *Star-Press*), Ball State basketball media guides and interviews with former players. I personally interviewed Shawn Parrish, Paris McCurdy, Greg Miller, and Chandler Thompson. I left messages for several other players and Dick Hunsaker, the coach of the 1989-90 team, using the most recent contact information I had, but I was unable to set up interviews with them.

Ball State and the NCAA Tournament

Those who study the NCAA men's basketball tournament will suggest that when filling out a bracket for an office pool, bettors should always pick at least one No. 12 seed to defeat a No. 5 seed. As of 2006, at least one No. 12 seed has pulled a first round upset in 17 of the last 18 years. Since the 5 vs. 12 match-up was created with the expansion of the tournament to 48 teams in 1980, a No. 12 seed has advanced in 24 of 28 tournaments.

Ball State has been seeded twelfth three times in the NCAA Tournament. In the school's first trip to the tournament in 1981, the Cardinals lost to fifth-seeded Boston College 93-90. Seeded twelfth in 1995, Ball State lost to Arizona State 88-61. But in 1990, a veteran Ball State team – seeded twelfth – made its mark on the college basketball world, not only winning its first round game but coming within three points of defeating the nation's best team to advance all the way to the Elite Eight.

In earning a spot in the Sweet 16, the 1990 Ball State team accomplished a feat no other men's basketball team in school history had accomplished before and none has accomplished again. Since the tournament grew to 48 teams in 1980, requiring two victories to advance to the Sweet 16, only four Mid-American Conference schools have reached that point. Eastern Michigan got there in 1991 and Miami (Ohio) made earned a spot in 1999. Only one MAC team has ever advanced further. Kent State made it to the Elite Eight in 2002. But the 1990 Ball State team was the first to reach that Sweet 16 peak.

The team did not have any real stars. None of its players went on to find professional basketball success in the United States. But the Cardinals utilized team play on offense and tenacious defense to win the MAC Championship and then shock two of college basketball's premier teams in the NCAA Tournament on their way to the regional semifinals. This is the story of the 1990 Ball State men's basketball season. How sweet it was.

The Team

The Sweet 16 team could best be described as a hodgepodge of players. Of the 10 players on the team who saw significant playing time, six were transfers to the program. Two of them were sophomores, though one of those had sat out the previous season under Prop 48 rules, which required freshmen with poor high school academic performances to sit out their first year. Finally, two of those 10 players were seniors who had spent their entire four-year careers at Ball State. In addition to the 10 players who received most of the playing time, four other players were on the season-opening roster, bringing the total to 14 players, each with their own unique experiences (*Ball State*, 2).

The Mainstays

Three players on the roster had been at Ball State for four years, though only two saw any real playing time during the 1989-90 season. All three had seen their roles change during former head coach Rick Majerus' two-year tenure at the helm when an infusion of talent began to send the program to the top of the Mid-American Conference.

Scott Nichols

Nichols was the point guard on the Sweet 16 team. A high school player in Detroit, he had come to Ball State as a freshman for the 1986-87 season. As a freshman and sophomore, he had averaged nearly eight points per game. But with a number of significant transfer players coming to Ball State for the 1988-89 season, his junior year, Nichols started to become a "true" point guard. After averaging 15.8 shots attempts in his first two seasons, Nichols attempted 8.7 as a junior and just 3.8 as a senior, in part because injuries somewhat limited his playing time (*Ball State*, 18). His job was to distribute the basketball. "In games during the summer, he could score a lot," teammate Greg Miller said. "But when it came to Ball State basketball, he understood his job. He was our floor general. He did things other players wouldn't want to do" (Miller interview).

Greg Miller

Miller was a local kid from neighboring Yorktown, Indiana, who starred in high school basketball at Yorktown High School. Miller had started 15 games as a sophomore in 1987-88. With the group of transfers that came in for Majerus' second year in 1988-89, Miller came off the bench in his final two years. Known for his long-range shooting ability, he was one of the Cardinals' top threats off the bench during the Sweet 16 season. He was a career 38 percent three-point shooter, but at 6-foot-6, he could also impact the

game going to the basket (*Ball State*, 15). “He was the best sixth man in America,” teammate Chandler Thompson said. “He gave you instant offense and energy. We could be down 10 points, and he could come in and get you 12 points in a minute and a half” (Thompson interview).

Rodney Haynes

Haynes played his high school basketball at nearby New Castle Chrysler High School, which owns one of the most tradition-rich basketball programs in the state of Indiana. Haynes finished his days at New Castle third on the school’s all-time scoring list behind former Indiana All-Stars Steve Alford and Kent Benson, who both went on to star at Indiana University. At Ball State, Haynes experienced the most drastic change in his role of any player under Majerus and 1989-90 coach Dick Hunsaker. During his freshman year under Al Brown and his sophomore year under Majerus, Haynes started more than half the games, teaming with Nichols in the backcourt. After starting 36 games his first two years, he appeared in just 20 more games during his career (*Ball State*, 13). “Four years ago, Rodney Haynes was part of a winning high school basketball program at New Castle,” *Muncie Star* sports reporter Ron Lemasters wrote during Haynes’ senior year. “He was an Indiana All-Star headed to Ball State University on a basketball scholarship. Now, he is an ex-starter, a member of the scout team – and still a team player” (Lemasters, “Sitting”).

For each of those three seniors, Dick Hunsaker was the third coach of their college careers. They were each recruited to Ball State by Brown and played their first season under him. They played their sophomore and junior seasons under Majerus before Hunsaker took over for the 1989-90 season.

The Transfers

While Hunsaker was the third coach for Nichols, Miller and Haynes, he was also the third or fourth coach for the players who transferred into the Ball State program.

Shawn Parrish

Parrish was another Indiana product, having grown up about 15 miles outside of Bloomington in the town of Spencer. He spent his first two collegiate seasons at Vincennes University before transferring to Ball State. Hunsaker was his third coach. As a Cardinal, Parrish was a kind of do-everything-guy. After starting as a junior, he came off the bench on the Sweet 16 team to average 5.1 points and 4.7 rebounds per game. He earned the team's spark award and was named All-MAC Honorable Mention. "Style, grace, athleticism . . . these terms have never been used alongside Parrish's name," *Muncie Star* sports reporter Gary Kalahar wrote in December 1989. "But when there's a rebound up for grabs, when there's a charge to take, when there's a loose ball waiting for someone to dive after it, the senior forward seems to be there" (Kalahar, "Mixing").

Billy Butts

Butts was another local player. He had played his high school basketball at Muncie Northside High School, which was located next to the Ball State campus. Out of high school, he headed to Ann Arbor to play for Bill Frieder at the University of Michigan. He spent a season there before transferring to Hutchinson Community College in Kansas. After his sophomore season, he transferred home to Ball State to play for Majerus. When Hunsaker took over the program, he was Butts' fourth coach in as many years. Partially responsible for Haynes' reduced playing time, Butts averaged 10 points a

game for his Ball State career, providing a strong outside scoring option. He was named the MVP of both MAC Tournaments in which he played.

Roman Muller

Muller also made his way to Ball State in a roundabout way. After graduating from Wisconsin Dells High School, the 7-foot-1 big man decided to stay in-state to play at Marquette, where Majerus was coaching at the time. Muller was red-shirted his first year, and then Majerus left Marquette for a position with the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks for the 1986-87 season. Muller saw little action that year and decided to transfer to Ellsworth Junior College in Iowa for the 1987-88 season. There he would prepare himself to rejoin Majerus, who had left the Bucks after less than a year to take the Ball State job. But again at Ball State, Muller would get to play for Majerus for only a year. When the Sweet 16 campaign opened in the winter of 1989, Muller was playing for a new coach in Hunsaker. In his five years of college, he played for four coaches, including two stints under Majerus.

Emanuel Cross

Cross came to Ball State from Casper Junior College in Wyoming. The 1988-89 season was his first on campus, but he sat that year out, improving his grades. When he joined the lineup at the beginning of the Sweet 16 season, he provided an added scoring punch at 8.5 points per game and also provided a solid back-up for Nichols at point guard. On a team that returned nine seniors, he was the only junior and one of two newcomers to the program. Because he never actually played a season for Majerus, Cross technically had just two collegiate coaches, something that was rare on this team.

Paris McCurdy and Curtis Kidd

It is not possible to mention one of these players without mentioning them both together. McCurdy and Kidd had been high school teammates in Detroit and had been best friends. "If it weren't for parents, we'd be brothers," Kidd told an *Indianapolis Star* reporter in 1989, "We're that close" (Chappell, "Butch"). Out of high school, the teammates decided to go together to the University of Arkansas-Little Rock. They experienced success there, going to the NCAA Tournament and the NIT in their two seasons at UALR. In 1987, during the summer following their sophomore years, McCurdy and Kidd had some legal problems. They reportedly found a wallet near the UALR campus and tried to use a credit card in it to buy \$500 worth of merchandise at a clothing store. McCurdy had previously been in trouble for an incident involving a stolen biology test. The two were dismissed from the team before the 1987-88 season.

Majerus had just taken the job at Ball State and was looking for players. He decided to take a chance on McCurdy and Kidd and brought them to Ball State. Arkansas-Little-Rock's loss proved to be Ball State's gain. After sitting out a year under transfer rules, the two played on Majerus' final Ball State team and then were seniors on the 1989-90 Sweet 16 team. They had each played for three coaches. More than any other players in the Cardinals' program, McCurdy and Kidd defined the team's style of play. On a team based on defense and rebounding, McCurdy and Kidd were strong defenders and were first and second on the team in rebounding. Both also averaged double figure points during their Ball State careers.

The Super Sophomores

On a team so top-heavy with upperclassmen, these players were the most inexperienced on the team. It was a talented class that would lead Ball State to the postseason in each of the next two years despite the loss of so many key seniors.

Chandler Thompson

On a team without a single freshman, Thompson could be classified as the team's "rookie." As a Proposition 48 athlete coming out of high school, he had been forced to sit out the 1988-89 season while he got his grades in order. Thompson was, perhaps, one of the most heralded recruits ever to come to Ball State. He was another local player, who had attended Muncie Central High School. Arguably the most tradition-rich basketball program in the state of Indiana, Muncie Central has won eight state championships. That eighth state title came during Thompson's senior year, when he was named an Indiana All-Star. He will be forever famous in Indiana for shutting down Concord's Shawn Kemp, a future NBA star, in the state championship game. He came to Ball State recruited by Majerus, but by the time he had a chance to suit up, Hunsaker was the head coach.

Mike Spicer

Spicer came to Ball State from Grand Rapids Central High School. After playing a reserve role as a freshman on the 1988-89 team, he got an opportunity start the first two games of the Sweet 16 season when Nichols was out with a knee injury. He quickly returned to the bench when Nichols came back, but he continued to be a contributor. He never scored more than four points a game, but when he would enter the game in relief of

Nichols, he would run the offense as Hunsaker had designed. Five times he had at least five assists off the bench, including a season-high seven against Cardinal Stritch.

Thompson and Spicer would go on to have more coaching stability in their college careers than their older teammates had. After playing his first season under Majerus, Spicer would play each of his final three under Hunsaker. Thompson never regained the year he lost to his Prop 48 status, and he played all three of his collegiate seasons for Hunsaker.

There were three other scholarship players on the 1989-90 active roster. Keith Stalling, who had averaged 5.8 points per game a year earlier, was a member of the sophomore class with Thompson and Spicer. He played in the Cardinals' first five games before suffering a season-ending injury. Mike Giunta was also a sophomore eligibility-wise, having red-shirted his true sophomore season the year before. He saw action in 13 games, averaging 1.5 points when he got on the floor. David Barber was the final scholarship player, though that had not always been the case. Yet another local player (from nearby Daleville), Barber had come to Ball State as a walk-on and earned a scholarship. He also played in 13 contests during the Sweet 16 season and averaged 2.4 points when he got a chance to play.

The Challenge

The challenge that comes with having so many players from so many different backgrounds who have played for so many different coaches is getting those players to gel. "We had guys that just came from everywhere on the map," Miller said. "The meshing of the team started with Majerus. We had a pretty big melting pot, but he had a way to drive you to get the most out of yourself" (Miller interview). But Majerus' departure for Utah

after the 1988-89 season meant the team would have to make another adjustment.

Hunsaker was promoted from the top assistant to the head coaching position, but there was still somewhat of a transition period. “As an assistant coach, he was kind of like one of the guys,” McCurdy said. “It was a big adjustment for the players to accept him as head coach” (McCurdy interview).

The Cardinals also faced the challenge of trying to repeat the success of the previous season, the best in school history. In 1988-89, its first season with transfers McCurdy, Kidd, Parrish, Butts and Muller, Ball State posted a 29-3 record and finished the season ranked 18th in the Associated Press poll. The 29-3 record was the best in the nation among Division I programs. The Cardinals won the Mid-American Conference regular season and the postseason tournament to earn an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. They were rewarded with No. 9 seed and defeated 8th-seeded Pittsburgh in the first round, the program’s first ever tournament victory, before falling to top-seeded Illinois in the second round. With nine seniors returning and the arrival of Thompson and Cross, the team was primed for a good season despite the fact it was breaking in a first-time head coach. “We had a veteran team back,” McCurdy said. “We were going into it trying to win a national championship, and we had confidence in each other that we could” (McCurdy interview). The Cardinals wouldn’t win the national championship, but they would come closer than any team in school history and any team to that point in Mid-American Conference history.

Hunsaker and Majerus

Majerus and Hunsaker met for the first time at a basketball camp in Colorado in 1976. Majerus was a Marquette assistant at the time, and Hunsaker was a player working

the camp. They stayed in touch, and Hunsaker came to Ball State when Majerus took the job in 1987.

Majerus, a Milwaukee kid, had developed his philosophies as a junior varsity player at Marquette and as a Marquette assistant coach under the legendary Al McGuire. After McGuire retired, Majerus continued as an assistant for several years before taking over the head job. Majerus had then made the jump to the NBA as an assistant with the Milwaukee Bucks for a year before taking the Ball State position.

Hunsaker had also played for a legendary coach in college, but only for a year. During his freshman year, he played at UTEP for coach Don Haskins, who famously led the school, then named Texas Western, to the 1966 National Championship over Adolph Rupp's Kentucky team. Following that first year, Hunsaker had transferred to Weber State to finish his collegiate career. He later became an assistant coach at Weber State. After he was passed over for the Weber State head coaching job, Hunsaker left for Majerus' staff at Ball State. When Majerus left for Utah, Hunsaker got his chance to be a head coach.

As coaches, Hunsaker and Majerus had similar philosophies but different personalities. Majerus had been hard on players in practice sessions, and it was Hunsaker's job as an assistant to make sure the players were alright after Majerus laid into them (Parrish interview). As a head coach, Hunsaker would have to become less of a friend and more of an authority figure. But he had the respect of his players, and they wanted him to be their coach. In the week between Majerus' departure for Utah and Hunsaker's hiring, Kidd went so far as to post a sign on the door of Majerus' old office that read, "Office of head coach Dick Hunsaker" (Benson, "Either"). The support for

Hunsaker among the players was widespread. "I'm a fan of Dick Hunsaker's. I think he deserves it," Butts said during the hiring process. "He knows the game, and he knows how to handle each player. He can be a friend off the court, and he can handle you on the court" (Zaleski, "Hunsaker").

When Hunsaker took over as head coach, he continued many of the same philosophies Majerus had instilled in the program. Under Majerus, Cardinal teams had placed a heavy emphasis on defense, rebounding and taking care of the basketball (Dunkin). Even if the team struggled to score, it would still have a chance to win if it did those things. When Hunsaker took over, he continued that style. Scoring was almost an afterthought. It was a style of play that Muncie Star sportswriter Gary Kalahar called "winning ugly" (Kalahar, "Sweet").

Hunsaker appeared to be in a no-win situation heading into his first season as head coach. All the pieces were in place. Majerus had left the program with nine returning seniors coming off the best season in school history. Expectations could not have been much higher. Even as he was leaving, Majerus set the bar high for the 1989-90 team. "I am leaving an established program. They will probably be better next season without me," Majerus said. "Maybe they can get into the third or fourth round next year" (Jones). If Hunsaker repeated the success of the previous season, that was just what he was supposed to do. If the team struggled at all, he would take the blame.

Coming Together

During the summer of 1989, the team got a chance to get used to playing for Hunsaker as head coach. The Cardinals traveled to the Netherlands to participate in the White Diamonds International Tournament against European professional teams. The

team played seven games in the tournament and won five of them to become the first American team to win the championship. Kidd led the way. “When we were in Europe, he was an animal,” Parrish said of his teammate. “He was dominant” (Parrish interview).

As much as the team members came together to win the tournament on the floor, they also grew closer through their off-court experiences in Europe. In Amsterdam, the team visited museums and the historic Amsterdam Windmill and saw wooden shoes being made. A photo in a later media guide shows four players riding bicycles through the streets of a European town. “We were always a close-knit group, but that was a great bonding experience for us,” Parrish said. “It gave us a chance to continue to play, to see the world, and to get used to Coach Hunsaker in a head coaching role” (Parrish interview).

Early Season Adversity

Coming off their summer experience and with high expectations for the season, the Cardinals got off to a rough start. Kidd, who had been named the preseason MAC player of the Year, and Nichols were both forced to undergo preseason knee surgeries. Kidd was ready to play in the season opener, but he wasn’t as effective as he had been the previous year. Nichols didn’t start the first two games.

With Nichols coming off the bench and Kidd not at full strength, Ball State headed to Mackey Arena in West Lafayette to open the regular season against Purdue. The previous year, Purdue had made an early-season trip to Muncie, where Ball State had earned a convincing 70-56 win over the Big 10 opponent. It was Majerus’ signature win at Ball State. Purdue has never again played a game in Muncie.

The 1989 contest at Mackey, however, would not be a signature win for Hunsaker. In his first game as head coach, the Cardinals struggled. They played their usual defense, forcing 19 Purdue turnovers, but they could not convert on the offensive end, shooting just 25.9 percent from the floor as a team. The hobbled Kidd played 35 minutes, more than anyone else on the team. He scored 12 points, but he managed to make just four out of 18 shots. McCurdy, the other inside scoring threat, scored just five points, prompting Hunsaker to say it was the worst he had seen McCurdy play in two years (Lemasters, "Boilers"). Butts, who had scored 20 points in the victory against Purdue a year earlier, went scoreless on 0-for-8 shooting. Thompson played 12 minutes off the bench and scored two points. He was not yet the presence he would become by mid-season. Ball State had grabbed an early 6-2 lead, but it was short-lived. Purdue rattled off 16 straight points and opened up a 30-19 halftime lead. The Cardinals would get no closer than eight points in the second half as Purdue breezed to a 57-43 win. "A lot of my fears were confirmed," Hunsaker said after the loss. "Now we can only go back to the practice floor" (Lemasters, "Hunsaker").

Ball State regrouped to win its next three games, but all were against opponents it was supposed to beat easily. The Cardinals defeated Division II Saginaw Valley State 66-45 before hosting their own tournament, the Cardinal Varsity Club Classic. Ball State handed Division III Hardin-Simmons a 98-70 loss in the first game before defeating Division I Coppin State, from the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, 71-66 in the championship game. The Cardinals shot better than 40 percent in each of those three wins, including 55 percent against Hardin-Simmons.

Coming off the three victories, Ball State took to the road again for a match-up with in-state rival Indiana State at the Hulman Center in Terre Haute. With the return to the road came the return of poor shooting. It was another game the Cardinals were supposed to win, but this time they lost. They shot 32 percent from the floor in a 49-48 defeat. Indiana State had some good teams in the late 1970s, including the 1979 team led by Larry Bird that went to the national championship game. The 1989-90 Sycamores, however, were not Bird's Sycamores. This team finished with an 8-20 record, including losses in 13 of its final 14 games.

Again, the defense was in fine form, but the offense left something to be desired. Ball State forced 15 Indiana State turnovers and held the Sycamores to 40 percent shooting. The Cardinals held Indiana State's leading scorer Eddie Bird to four points. The younger brother of Larry had entered the contest averaging 23 points per game. Butts had a jump shot to win the game at the buzzer but could not connect. The performance left Hunsaker praising his team's defense and wondering about its offense. "Our defensive effort was outstanding," he said after the loss. "It was as fine as we've ever had. We took their key player out of the game. We're just an inept offensive team" (Kalahar, "Inept").

As they had done after the Purdue loss, the Cardinals played better offensively in the next few games. But just as in the contests following the Purdue loss, the games following the Indiana State loss were against lesser competition. Ball State first traveled to Valparaiso, where the Cardinals handed the Crusaders a 69-62 loss. McCurdy and Thompson led Ball State with 16 points each. It was McCurdy's season high to that point, though he would better it the next time out. For Thompson, the Valparaiso game was a bit of a coming-out party. In his fourth start, the sophomore played 25 minutes and scored 16

points, both season-highs to that point. He made 8-of-11 shots, and the team shot 51 percent from the floor. Thompson sealed the game with a reverse dunk in the closing minute.

Eight days later, Ball State set what is still a school record for largest margin of victory, defeating Cardinal Stritch 116-52. The Cardinals led by as many as 70 points and put six scorers in double figures against the NAIA opponent from Milwaukee. Ball State then faced a transitioning Butler team in its first season under Barry Collier. Collier would lead the program to success later in the 1990s, but the 1989-90 Bulldogs finished 6-22. Thompson led three Ball State scorers in double figures as the Cardinals turned a single-digit second half lead against Butler into a 63-42 victory.

Ball State had opened the season 6-2, but only three of its wins had come against Division I opponents. The team had lost badly to the only quality opponent it had faced, Purdue. It had also lost to a poor Indiana State team. The team's next game would offer a much bigger challenge.

The Turnaround

Coming off Christmas Break, Ball State traveled to Rosemont, Ill., to play in the Old Style Classic, a four-team tournament featuring Illinois, Memphis State, and Grambling. Ball State played No. 15 Memphis State in the first round, with the winner staring at a championship game match-up with Illinois, a Final Four team a year earlier.

Ball State led for much of the game. After taking a 31-29 advantage at halftime, the Cardinals opened up a double-digit lead at 61-51 with eight minutes to play. Memphis State came all the way back and took a two-point lead into the final minute before a Kidd offensive rebound and put-back tied the score 67-67 and sent the game into overtime. The

teams went back-and-forth in the extra period, and McCurdy connected from close range to tie the game again 73-73 with 33 seconds remaining. Memphis State took possession and held the ball until Elliot Perry drove the left side of the lane and pulled up for a 10-footer with four seconds left that gave the Tigers the lead. Memphis State would add free throw and escape with a 76-73 win.

The Cardinals placed four players in double figures, including McCurdy's team-high 19 points, but they could not stop Perry, who finished with a game-high 33. For Ball State, it was a tough loss, especially after having led late in the game, but it served as a turning point in the season. Following the loss, the Cardinals rallied to win 10 of their next 11 games. Their first victim was Grambling in the consolation game of the Old Style Classic. Every Ball State player who saw action against Grambling scored as the Cardinals rolled to a 79-56 win. McCurdy scored 18 points and grabbed 19 rebounds to secure a spot on the all-tournament team.

Ball State then entered Mid-American Conference play by traveling to Central Michigan. Kidd led four double figure scorers with 14 points, and the Cardinal defense locked down the Chippewas. Ball State allowed just one field goal in the final 10 minutes of the first half on the way to an 83-60 win. At that time, the Cardinals had never defeated a MAC opponent by a larger margin. The win would be a precursor of things to come in later meetings with the Chippewas.

Ball State continued MAC play with a win over Bowling Green and an 18-point road victory at Eastern Michigan. Then, against Florida International, the Cardinals notched their second 50-plus point margin of victory of the season. Ball State led 50-19 at the half and didn't let up on its way to a 105-50 victory. Every Cardinal played, and all

but one scored. Miller led five scorers in double figures with a season-high 20 points on 8-of-9 shooting. Ball State shot 61 percent as a team, its best shooting game of the season, and held Florida International to 40 percent shooting. The defensive effort marked the fifth game in a row Ball State held its opponent to 40 percent or worse from the floor.

In the next game, Ball State allowed Kent State to shoot 52 percent from the floor and suffered its only loss during that 11-game stretch. Butts scored two of his game-high 18 points to put the Cardinals in front 68-67, but Ball State went scoreless with three offensive fouls in the final three minutes. Kent State won 71-68, handing Ball State its first MAC loss of the season. The Cardinals rebounded with back-to-back home wins against Toledo and Miami before smothering Western Michigan to move to 6-1 in the conference. In a 65-38 win over the Broncos in Kalamazoo, the Cardinals set two team records. First, they re-broke the record for largest margin of victory in a conference road game, which they had set earlier in the season against Central Michigan. Second, the 38 points marked the lowest point total to which Ball State had ever held a MAC opponent. No Western Michigan player scored more than seven points.

The Cardinals continued with a 14-point victory over Ohio and a one-point win at Bowling Green. If teams still hadn't known how good Ball State's defense was, they did after the Bowling Green game. Ball State won the game despite scoring just 45 points on the road. The Cardinals barely shot 30 percent from the floor as a team, but they held the Falcons to 38 percent. Ball State led 45-44 with 2:49 to play, and neither team scored again. The win improved Ball State's MAC-leading conference record to 8-1.

In the next game, a one-point decision would go against Ball State. Eastern Michigan came into Muncie looking for revenge for an 18-point loss Ball State had handed the Hurons a month earlier in Ypsilanti. Eastern Michigan led down the stretch until Butts canned a three-pointer with 38 seconds left to bring the score even at 57-57. The Hurons turned the ball over with 23 seconds left, giving Ball State a chance to hold for the last shot. But McCurdy missed a shot in the lane and Eastern Michigan took possession on a held ball with seven seconds left. Charles Thomas inbounded the ball and threw it long to Lorenzo Neely, who had gotten behind the Ball State defense. McCurdy saved an easy lay-up by fouling Neely, but Neely connected on 1-of-2 free throws to give Eastern Michigan the one-point win.

The Cardinals avenged a loss of their own the next time out, handing Kent State a 77-50 thumping. The game was essentially decided in the first nine minutes, when Ball State held the Golden Flashes without a field goal. Thompson scored 21 points, and Cross added 13 as Ball State rebounded from the Eastern Michigan loss. But three days later, the Cardinals would be on the receiving end of a beating.

Ball State traveled to Toledo's Savage Hall to take on the Rockets, who entered the game with a 9-13 record and only four conference wins. The record didn't matter that night. When Ball State had struggled offensively in the past, its defense had at least kept the games close. At Toledo, the Cardinals shot 35 percent from the floor and allowed 53 percent shooting on the other end of the court. McCurdy scored 15 points, but no other Cardinal scored more than nine. Toledo won the game 68-47, handing Ball State its worst loss of the season. It was also the last loss the Cardinals would experience until the NCAA Tournament.

Ball State closed the regular season with four straight MAC wins to finish the conference season 13-3, good enough for first place for the second year in a row. In the first three games of the stretch Ball State saw three of its top players score season-highs in points. Following the Toledo loss, Ball State traveled to Oxford, Ohio, and defeated Miami 79-73 behind McCurdy's season-best 22 points. Three days later, Kidd scored a season-high 21 points in a 77-54 Ball State win against Western Michigan. Four days after that, the Cardinals traveled to Athens, Ohio, where Thompson put up his season-best of 24 points in a 77-60 win over the Bobcats. Ball State then closed out the regular season with an 84-57 victory against Central Michigan in Muncie. It marked the Cardinals' second win over the Chippewas by at least 20 points. There was a third yet to come. (Information on these games came primarily from accounts in *The Muncie Star* and the *Ball State 1990 Tournament Media Guide*.)

The MAC Tournament

Ball State entered the MAC Tournament in Detroit as the regular season conference champion for the second year in a row, a feat none of the other conference schools had ever accomplished. If the Cardinals won the tournament, they would become the first school in conference history to accomplish that feat in back-to-back years as well. The previous season, Ball State had soundly defeated Ohio in the first round of the tournament before surviving by one point in the semifinal against Eastern Michigan and two points in the final versus Kent State. The 1990 tournament would not provide as difficult a challenge for the top-seeded Cardinals.

Playing Ohio in the first round again, Ball State led by 21 points before a late Bobcat run cut the final deficit to 77-70. Butts hit a then tournament record six three-

pointers on his way to matching his season-high with 18 points, and McCurdy led Ball State with 19 points. The victory set up a second round contest with Eastern Michigan in a rematch of the previous year's second round game. Against the Hurons, Ball State trailed by as many as five points in the second half before using a 16-2 run to open up a double-digit lead and win 69-58. McCurdy again led Ball State in scoring, this time with 18 points, and Butts scored 14.

The Cardinals moved on to the championship game to face Central Michigan, a team they had already beaten handily twice during the regular season. Ball State earned another 20-plus point victory against the Chippewas, winning 78-56 to secure the conference's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament for the second straight year. Butts again nailed six three-pointers, scoring 19 points to go along with 19 from Kidd. Butts finished the tournament 17-for-30 from the floor in the three games for 51 points. He was named the tournament's MVP, and McCurdy and Kidd were both named to the all-tournament team. Central Michigan's coach at the time, Charlie Coles, was so impressed with Ball State after his team's second regular season loss to the Cardinals, that he said there wasn't a team in the country with better teamwork. "The last two years I've witnessed something, and I don't think I'll ever be the same as a coach," Coles said. "I hope we copy something like that. If the rest of the teams in the league can't build on that model then there's something wrong with us. It's the only way to do it. Teamwork" (Kalahar, "Central's"). (Information on the MAC Tournament games came primarily from accounts in *The Muncie Star*.)

The NCAAs

Ball State would take its team style of basketball to the NCAA Tournament for the second consecutive year and the fourth time in school history. On the way back from the MAC Tournament in Detroit, the team stopped at a hotel to watch the NCAA Tournament selection show on television (McCurdy interview). The Cardinals were unveiled as a No. 12 seed in the West Regional. They would open the tournament against fifth-seeded Oregon State at the Huntsman Center on the campus of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

Utah had just finished its first season under its new head coach, but Majerus had only been courtside for six games. He had undergone heart surgery and been forced away from coaching for the rest of the season. Utah had finished the season 16-14 and out of postseason play. The next year, their first entire season with Majerus, the Utes would go 30-4 and finish with a No. 10 national ranking and a Sweet 16 appearance. With no team to coach in the 1989-90 tournament, Majerus was in Salt Lake City to greet the Cardinals when they arrived and to watch his former team play in the first round. And the Cardinals would not disappoint.

The Oregon State Game

The first round match-up against the Pac-10's Oregon State Beavers provided an interesting game within the game. Oregon State's best player was Gary Payton. He had been named the college basketball player of the year by *Sports Illustrated*, and he would go on to star in the NBA first with the Seattle Supersonics and later with four other teams, including the 2006 NBA Champion Miami Heat. He would earn the nickname

“The Glove,” because of his stifling defense, but as much as his defense, he was known for his mouth, which never stopped running.

The Ball State team, though, had a player who could do a little trash-talking of his own. McCurdy was known to gab with opposing players, coaches, and even referees, on occasion. Reports in old newspaper clippings have McCurdy talking to an opposing team’s free throw shooters and jawing with then Bowling Green coach Jim Larranaga, who went on to have postseason success of his own with George Mason in the 2006 NCAA Tournament. “They called it trash-talking,” McCurdy said. “I was just telling the guy what I was going to do to him” (McCurdy interview).

Having Payton and McCurdy on the same floor at the same time provided the possibility for some fireworks. They weren’t always matched-up against each other, but that didn’t stop them from getting a few words in. “McCurdy was in his ear, to be sure, but he was also on the receiving end of an All-American line of ‘trash talk’ from Payton,” *Muncie Star Sports* Editor Ron Lemasters wrote in the next day’s newspaper. “There was no love lost on the floor between the two, and there were shoves and bumps and evil looks” (Lemasters, “BSU’s”) On this day McCurdy would come out on top, but not because of any spectacular offensive performance.

McCurdy made just 3-of-11 shots from the floor and finished the game with 9 points. As a team, the Cardinals struggled from the floor, connecting on 18-of-53 attempts for 34 percent – not exactly a formula for a tournament upset. But it was the Ball State defense, as it had been during much of the season, that carried the team against Oregon State. On the defensive end, the Cardinals held the Beavers to an even worse shooting percentage than their own, 31 percent on 19-of-61 shooting. Payton still led

Oregon State in scoring, but Ball State smothered him into 3-of-12 shooting for 11 points, well below his 26.3-point average. For the Cardinals offensively, Thompson matched his season-high with 24 points, but he was the only Ball State player to reach double figures. McCurdy may have scored only nine points, but he scored the three biggest points of his career against Oregon State to seal his legacy in Muncie.

With the score tied 51-51, Oregon State's Teo Alibegovic sank a short jumper with three seconds left to put the Beavers up by two points. Forced to go the length of the floor to tie the game, Ball State called its final timeout. The plan was to get the ball into Thompson, who had the hot hand. Coming out of the timeout, Kidd fired a long inbounds pass to Thompson, who caught the ball near the free throw line and turned to go to the basket. As he turned, the ball was knocked out of his hands and went out of bounds underneath the basket. Now out of timeouts, Ball State was going to be forced to run one of its normal inbounds plays until Oregon State called one of its timeouts to set up its defense. The extra break would give Ball State a chance to set up the most famous play in the history of Ball State basketball.

Hunsaker grabbed the dry-erase board in the huddle to sketch out a play. He drew one but quickly scrapped it for another. He soon decided he didn't like the second one either and erased it, as well. Finally he settled on a third play (Parrish interview). "First he said, 'Greg (Miller), sub for Paris,'" McCurdy said. "Then he said, 'No, Paris you're going to win the game'" (McCurdy interview). And win the game he did. Spicer in-bounded the ball and threw it into McCurdy on the left baseline, where he put up a short jump shot that found nothing but net as time expired. At the same time, a whistle blew,

signaling a foul on the play. McCurdy went to the free throw line by himself with no time on the clock and knocked down one free throw to win the game, 54-53.

Ball State had advanced by playing its style of basketball, playing shut-down defense and scoring just enough – “winning ugly” as it had been called. Hunsaker agreed after the game that his team’s offensive performance was lacking. “We told them, ‘If you’re going to stand, stand on offense,’ and they obliged,” Hunsaker was quoted as saying in the *Muncie Star*. “We stood on offense. A lot. I told them Rick (Majerus) must have gone to the rest room twice to throw up, watching us on offense” (Kalahar, “Oh”). No matter how ugly the victory had been, Ball State was moving on to the second round of the NCAA Tournament for the second year in a row. There the Cardinals would meet a perennial college basketball power in fourth-seeded Louisville.

The Louisville Game

Against Louisville, Ball State would face another future NBA player in Felton Spencer, and Hunsaker would match wits with a legendary coach in Denny Crum. In the match-up of opposing Cardinals, Ball State would again be the underdog, but it was a role to which it had grown accustomed. Ball State shot the ball considerably better against Louisville and again forced its opponent into a low shooting percentage. The Cardinals from Ball State led from start to finish.

Ball State jumped on Louisville early, opening up a 28-12 lead on the nation’s 16th-ranked team. Spencer managed just two points in the first half as Ball State held on to a 13-point lead at the break. The seven-footer finished with 14 points to lead Louisville, but Ball State’s big men controlled the paint, outscoring Louisville’s inside

players 45-26. Louisville, which had earned the nickname “The Doctors of Dunk,” managed just one dunk the entire game.

Ball State stretched its lead 17 points in the second half at 46-29 before it fell victim to an offensive drought. The Cardinals from Muncie went six minutes without a point as Louisville whittled the lead down to three points. Louisville would stay within single digits for the rest of the game. Two free throws from Spencer cut Ball State’s lead to 62-60 with 1:16 to play. Those were the last points either team would score. After a McCurdy turnover, a Spencer miss, and a Thompson missed free throw, Louisville took possession for the final time with seven seconds to play. This time, Louisville could not get Spencer the ball, and it wound up instead in the hands of Everick Sullivan, who had scored just two points. Sullivan put up a three-pointer at the buzzer that would have won the game, but it bounced off the rim.

After suffering those four losses by three points or less in the regular season, Ball State had won two tournament games by a total of three points. Thompson had 15 points (as did Butts), to again lead the team in scoring, as he would do in each tournament game. Ball State had now advanced further than it ever had before. With two wins in front of Majerus in Salt Lake City under their belts, the Cardinals packed up and headed to Oakland for the Sweet 16. Their opponent: No. 1 seed Nevada-Las Vegas.

The UNLV Game

Playing the regional semifinal in Oakland, California, Miller said he remembers seeing celebrities in the crowd, such as Chris Mullin and James “Buster” Douglas. “But the guys we were playing were celebrities in their own right,” he said (Miller interview).

The Runnin' Rebels featured future NBA players Larry Johnson, Stacey Augmon, and Greg Anthony. On paper, the game was a mismatch.

Ball State hung with the nation's top team for the entire game. UNLV opened up a nine point lead at 68-59 with two minutes left to play, but timely shooting and UNLV's free throw line struggles allowed the Cardinals to claw back. Thompson drained a three-pointer to close the gap to six points. After Augmon failed to connect on the front end of a one-and-one, Butts hit his second three-pointer of the game to bring Ball State within three points at 68-65 with just more than a minute to play. UNLV extended its lead to four points with a free throw, but Thompson cut that lead to 69-67, scoring on a lay-in with 20 seconds left. Ball State fouled Anthony, who couldn't connect at the free throw line. When the Cardinals rebounded the ball, they advanced it across half-court and called their final timeout with 12.6 seconds remaining.

During the timeout, Hunsaker drew up a play for McCurdy to take Johnson one-on-one for what Ball State hoped would be the tying basket (Thompson interview). That play never happened. McCurdy got the ball but slipped as he went to make his move. As he was falling, he was able to get the ball to Spicer, who worked his way to the free throw line before tossing an indecisive lob pass to Thompson under the basket. The pass never reached Thompson, and UNLV escaped with a win. As he had done the entire tournament, Thompson led the Cardinals with 21 points. McCurdy and Kidd each finished with a double-double in their final collegiate game. McCurdy scored 17 points and grabbed 11 rebounds, and Kidd added 11 points and 12 rebounds.

The Cardinals headed home following the loss, and UNLV moved on to the Elite Eight, where it destroyed tournament darling Loyola Marymount, which was playing

without the recently deceased Hank Gathers, 131-101. The Rebels then defeated Georgia Tech in the national semifinals before demolishing a Christian Laettner-led Duke team 103-73 in the national championship game. UNLV won its six tournament games by an average of 18.7 points, and no team came closer to beating the Runnin' Rebels than Ball State. (Information on the NCAA Tournament games came primarily from accounts in *The Muncie Star*.)

Place in History

Since March 1990, Ball State has returned to the NCAA Tournament on three occasions, losing in the first round each time. In 1993, the 15th-seeded Cardinals lost to second-seeded Kansas, which went on to make the Final Four. The 1995 team lost in the first round to Arizona State. In Ball State's most recent trip to the tournament in 2000, the team was seeded 11th and lost to sixth-seeded UCLA. The Cardinals have also made four appearances in the National Invitation Tournament: 1991, 1992, 1998, and 2002. No team, though, has been able to recapture what the 1990 team had.

The 2001-02 team probably came the closest. That team opened the season in the Maui Invitational with wins over third-ranked Kansas and fourth-ranked UCLA. Those Cardinals finished the regular season 20-11 and in first place in the MAC West, but a second round MAC Tournament loss to Bowling Green left them out of the NCAA Tournament. They went to the NIT and won three games before falling to South Carolina in the quarterfinals. Ball State's run in Maui garnered the most attention the basketball program had received since 1990, but it couldn't match the excitement of the Sweet 16 season. (Information on Ball State's NCAA Tournament history and the 2001 Maui Invitational came from the *2005-06 Ball State Basketball Media Guide*.)

In comparing the 1990 team to others in Ball State history, the glaring difference is the number of transfers and junior college players on the roster. The 1990 Ball State team was not the biggest team, but it had enough size. It was not the highest scoring team, but it scored when it needed to score. It had no future NBA stars, but it had players who understood their roles. The players say it was their competitive nature and close bonds as teammates that were the cornerstones for their success. “We were a bunch of guys that loved to compete,” Parrish said. “Our practices were brutal. We went after each other. We beat each other up. You looked forward to the games because you knew you were going to get a break” (Parrish interview).

Thompson said that competitive spirit brought the players closer as a team. “We were family,” he said. “Everybody had each other’s back no matter what. Those seniors brought us along for the ride, and we rode on their coat tails” (Thompson interview). The experience of the nine seniors cannot be overlooked, but Miller, one of those seniors, said part of the reason for their success was that they just had fun playing basketball. “We took pride in playing hard and doing what it took to win,” Miller said. “Our team wasn’t like any other in the last 40 years at Ball State” (Miller interview).

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